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## Gay in Uganda, and Feeling Hunted

By [JEFFREY GETTLEMAN](#)

KAMPALA, Uganda — Isolation, insults, threats and violence: this is what [Uganda](#)'s mostly closeted gay community has dealt with for years.

But now that Ugandan politicians are threatening to pass a [new anti-homosexuality bill](#) that would sentence some homosexuals (serial offenders, those who are H.I.V. positive and others) to life in prison or even death, many gay men and lesbians said they felt hunted.

"We walk on the streets knowing that at any moment someone could be knowing you and there could be mob justice," said Stosh Mugisha, a woman who is going through a transition to become a man. "You feel embarrassed by someone touching you. People provoke us. But I just play it cool. Keep a low profile. It is terrible."

Val Kalende, another of the few out — and outspoken — gay rights activists in this country of 32 million people, said being gay in Uganda is "quite problematic."

"If you're in school and your parents find out, they'll stop paying school fees," she said. "Your family will avoid you. They used to ask me, 'Don't you want to have children? Don't you want a man?'"

Anti-gay sentiments are one thing, and hardly unique to Uganda. But what seems different here is the level of official, government-sponsored anti-gay hate speech.

"I detest gays in my heart," said Kassiano E. Wadri, a member of Parliament and the chief whip of the opposition. "When I see a gay, I think that person needs psychotherapy. You need to break him."

It's no surprise, then, that many homosexual people here insisted on being interviewed anonymously, including one car salesman who goes by Bob. He lost his job working in a hotel a few years ago after the Red Pepper, a Ugandan tabloid, published a list of names of homosexuals, including his.

"When your boss finds out you're gay, you get harassed," he said. "Then you start getting scolded in front of others. Then fired."

It is hard finding a boyfriend, he said, "because you don't know who to trust."

He took a deep breath and looked down at his hands. "It's a very big mess to be gay in Uganda,"

he said.

Nikki Mawanda is a 27-year-old who was born female but lives as a man — he describes himself as a “trans-man.” He said that as a child, he would stare at the sun for long stretches, hoping the trauma would change his sex. Now, he binds his breasts with tight bandages, wears a baseball cap backward with little dreadlocks hanging out, and dates women.

“This year terrible things happened to me,” he said.

A policeman jabbed a finger in his eye, he said, someone threw a beer in his face at a bar, and a security guard at a minimarket pistol-whipped him simply for trying to buy groceries.

But there is an oasis away from all this, and it is not even a closely kept secret.

Every Sunday night in central Kampala, the capital, at a steamy nightclub down the street from a school and behind some sooty palm trees, dozens of gay men, lesbians and transgender people gather for cold beer and bad lip-syncing.

This past Sunday, gay men were shooting pool, bumping and grinding on the dance floor, and bobbing their heads to a dismal karaoke show on stage. Two gay women nuzzled on a stool, holding hands and taking alternate swigs from a Nile Special brew. There were probably more than 100 gay people in the club and just as many who were not gay.

For some reason, the Ugandan police force has left this place alone, though many people worry that its days are numbered.

One European gay man, who asked not to be identified, lifted his chin, pointing to the whole scene.

“See, this is what I mean,” he said. “Look at everybody here, gay and straight. There’s no problem.”

He gave a hug to a tall friend.

“It’s not homosexuality that it is imported,” the European man said. “It’s homophobia.”

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